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ChromaZone

Donegan, Rosemary

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CHROMAZONE

The ChromaZone thing was about work; it was about reacting to the art object rather than the person... I suppose a belief in the object, not necessarily the painted object, putting faith back in the created thing... So in that sense Tim fitted in really well because he was a "worker" in his studio, creating these dresses. He himself was just working all the time. His work was really playful though.

[...]
It is not important what your medium is, whether it is painting or video. It is more important to make sure your work is having reception. You can't just produce it, and hope that the distribution will follow. Artists have to be involved in the distribution side just as much. I think that is what we were trying to do in ChromaZone. Not somehow to elevate or valorize painting, but more to say whatever your form is it has got to be somehow hooked into the culture, hooked into things that are going on. Looking for an audience, finding an audience. You can't just be content to say, "It's my work because I do it! You don't like it, too bad."

OLIVER GIRLING

ChromaZone was dirty, fun, enjoyable, nobody cleaned it up. We like to think of ourselves as the "wild guys." We were the wild ones, we weren't sitting at that point being serious grown-up artists. We had the best parties in town. But of course, we were very serious, we actually did this, we put the energy into it to make things happen.

[...]
It is hard to conceive today that because we were doing figurative works, painting, it was considered extremely reactionary. You just couldn't do that among our peers. Yet, ChromaZone was a reaction to the pseudo-intellectualism of things, we were really into gut-wrenching painting and images, sex and death and all that stuff. Trying to put the juice back into painting that had been squeezed out

by the Greenberg school and all the old Mirvish Gallery crowd.⁴

[...]
The minute we opened the gallery there were a million gazillion people out there who were feeling the same thing that we were feeling. It isn't really surprising, because you never own ideas, they are in the air. This was before the New Image Painting came out; obviously it was going on, but it hadn't hit the news yet, so we were doing it in our own way. Once we opened ChromaZone, it was just like a floodgate in interest because people wanted to be part of it right away. That was one of our intentions, trying to join music, pop culture, fashion, video, low art, high art, the whole thing. We didn't want to be an ivory tower in a nice clean space. We wanted to encompass everything in a living art. R]

Oliver Girling always said that ChromaZone was the path of least resistance, in the sense that it was IN-clusive, rather than EX-clusive. Anybody who ever applied got a show at some point, even if we put them all in a group show. Whenever we had a germ of an idea, it would start out with six people, and then it was twenty-one before we turned around. I think our inclusive attitude was the reason behind our success, besides the fact that we liked to party, had music, and danced at our openings. Art was fun and that was radical.

[...]
ChromaZone was about collective action, collectivism. We operated as a collective; other artist-run galleries were made up of boards, they didn't operate as a collective. The collective energy that made ChromaZone, there was strength in it, strength for us as artists. People joined it, they brought their ideas to it.

SYBIL GOLDSTEIN



What we were doing was less mediated. Less mediated by concerns with electronic media, less mediated by various fashionable theoretical discourses. It was really trying to make an art that was more direct, more about people's lives, their lived lives.

AF

The ChromaZone artists with their commitment to a figurative expressive style and their attachment to the tactility of painting were part of the resurgence of painting and drawing in the early 1980s, which was labelled Neo-Expressionism in New York and Berlin. Yet the artists around ChromaZone were also engaged and responding to the larger art-world critique of representation, stimulated by French Structuralist theory and new feminist critical theory. The visual coherence of the work was their active and unabashed appropriation of mass media, literature, art history, and classical mythological and contemporary allegory. The particular impetus for ChromaZone was the punk sensibility of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I think a lot of people around ChromaZone took from punk the idea that all constructs are cultural: you can't get back to the land, you can't get back to degree zero of civilization. Everything we do builds on something that has already happened. You pick and choose from the past and different cultures, and you try to do so in a way that is not exploitative, specifically meaning that you don't rip off people that can't protect their cultural property. But nevertheless, you've got to move, you have to move between cultures; there are not enough resources in this culture... I think a lot of punk is about appropriating our own culture, appropriating the past, recycling cultural images, from the media. But there is also a limit to how much you can do that, or how much energy it continues to have. It is true that the notion of ripping off other cultures has become much clearer than it was in the past, particularly the 1960s. OG

The opening of ChromaZone happened simultaneously with the beginning of organizations like the Women's Cultural Building (wcb), the Artculture Resource Centre (ARC), and Toronto Community Videotex growing out of Trinity Square Video. All of these organizations and production centres not only continued to reinforce the development of the Queen Street West area as a centre of arts activity, but they also encouraged a particular kind of self-directed and initiated artistic practice. Because artists working in video, film, magazine production, installation, and multimedia performance required a developed technical production and distribution system, the necessity to work together and pool technical resources had formed the basis for the heightened practical reality of an "arts community," as opposed to the singularly social or aesthetic definition. Since all of these facilities originated in artist-driven groups operating outside the commercial gallery/dealers' network, there was a strong co-operative artist-driven organizational base.

The development of this artist-run production and distribution network was made possible by the support of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council, both to individual artists and to parallel gallery spaces. In the late 1970s the network was small and funding a new space was relatively inexpensive, while the labour of renovation and sitting the galleries was done by the artists.

We had just decided that we couldn't wait around for things to happen, so we did it ourselves. And I think it has created a tremendous change in the thinking, the outlook, the general sensibility of artists over the past twenty years. It is hard to find any artist who isn't doing extracurricular activities, like being on some committee, or something connected to some parallel gallery. There are so many organizations, so many people doing things—that is very different from my earlier experience. TW

The ethos of artist-initiated activity was enhanced by a number of large multi-site events. The first was the huge *Monumenta* exhibition mounted in the fall of 1982 as a pun on Germany's documenta. Organized through YYY by David Clarkson, Stan Denniston, and Bernie Miller, it included seventy-five artists at six galleries. At the time Denniston expressed the idea that "*Monumenta* is not a curatorial statement, but a community statement" (*Toronto Star*, 14 September 1982) and "We are right on the cusp of a pretty strong change in attitudes about making art. We wanted to develop a new forum for issues of representation and meaning an art that is not about itself, but about the world" (*Globe & Mail*, 3 September, 1982). In 1984, a second multi-venue exhibition, *New City of Sculpture*, was organized by Clarkson and Robert Wiens and included work by thirty local sculptors.

Similarly in the field of criticism, a series of lectures, *Talking — A Habit*, organized by Christina Ritchie out of A Space and held at the Rivoli over the winter of 1982–1983 was the beginning of a public critical discussion. With lectures by Philip Monk, Kerri Kwinter, Tim Guest, and John Bentley Mays, among numerous others, it was one of the most overt engagements between artists, curators, and critics attempting to elucidate the new aesthetic and critical direction particularly in dealing with local artists' work.

With the arrival of the commercial galleries, founded by independently wealthy collectors-cum-dealers like Ydessa Hendeles, David Bellman, and later S. L. Simpson, the locale started to evolve as a commercial gallery area. The move of Carmen Lamanna and the Isaacs Gallery from Yonge and Bloor Streets saw the two most established and respected commercial galleries rather belatedly brought into this arena. The development of 80

Spadina in the fall of 1982 as a private gallery building brought an entire range of commercial galleries, many catering to a more traditional art market outside the terrain of the avant-garde. But there is no doubt that it was the artist-run galleries and production co-ops that were the infrastructure upon which the commercial galleries developed.

In 1986, ChromaZone, unlike many other artist-run spaces that had developed in Toronto, formally decided to disband. Exhaustion due to the amount of work involved in physically maintaining the space and the arduous process of applying for funding were major reasons. There were also arguments and debates over issues of core funding, bureaucratization, and individual artists wanting to focus on their own artwork.

It was kind of painful to quit, yet it was a relief. But it was sad to stop having the space... It was an identity, and it is hard to give that up. But I think it was the smartest thing that we did. Made us bigger, more mythological than if we'd kept going and become the establishment. I'm glad ChromaZone didn't. RJ

PUBLIC VENUES

It is important to remember that in the mid-1970s, the only places that seemed to be open on Queen Street West at night and on weekends were fast food chains like Harvey's and maybe a donut shop. What pushed and in many ways galvanized the area into a public place was the appearance of a number of public venues beyond the studios, production houses, and galleries. In 1979 the Spadina Hotel's upstairs Cabana Room opened under artist management. It became the scene of a number of developing new bands, performance events, and art parties.

I think when I started feeling like I was part of something. It really did pivot around when the Cabana

Room in the Spadina Hotel opened. Before then I found people quite closed. I'd always thought of Toronto as being quite territorial; people chalked up their own little turf and then beat everyone back from it. The Cabana Room—plus the Subway Room, which was an after hours bar in the basement—was the first environment where I felt people weren't being really uptight. All of a sudden you are all thrown in together and I remember talking to people, saying, this is great! This was the first time I'd ever talked to some of these artists, although I'd know who they were to see around the street. AF

The restaurants on Queen Street West were the most essential factor in the public perception of the area as an "art scene." The public assumed that the waiters were artists; whether they were or not, they became surrogates for artists and the public relished the contact. This is part of the larger commodification of artists and of artistic lifestyles. Many of the other businesses that had been in the area for years, like Jacob's Hardware, the Stem restaurant, Roneems Estonian Bakery, and Atlas Tools, a tool and machinery supply store, absorbed these new customers in the somewhat anonymous mode of the area. The street was becoming the "representation of a neighbourhood," a specific place, an arts neighbourhood, which by the 1990s became an urban planning definition of the area, extending eventually along Queen Street West into the neighbourhood of Parkdale.

With the opening of the Cameron House in the fall of 1981, the scene was set. The Cameron had been a public bar since the 1890s. The new owners, Herb Tookey, and siblings Paul and Ann-Marie Sannella, wanted to create an artists' bar, but they also attempted to continue to cater to the traditional clientele during the daytime. As they evolved an entertainment policy and gradually redecorated the space, the Cameron provided a continuous

musical hothouse, with young bands and performers booked in on an informal basis. Many groups, from Video Cabaret to the wCB to ChromaZone, were also provided with free meeting space.

To me there wasn't much of a community, until there was a place for a community to form and meet. With the opening of the Cameron there was a place to drink and sit next to each other. Literally it had everything to do with the sense of community that artists enjoyed for the next few years. Because you actually had people talking to each other, that might normally not talk to each other, eventually they'd talk about their work and it would become collaborative or argumentative or controversial or whatever context it would come into. But the Cameron was the central focal point for that. It was very hot from 1981-1985.

[...]

The Cameron money scam was one of Herb Tookey's ideas. Rae Johnson designed a five dollar bill, Herb had them printed up and he would pay everybody off in Cameron money. It was good at a few locations on the street: Gwartzman's Art Supplies, the Stem, Jacobs Hardware, and some art supply shops. He figured that was all you needed, and for a while it was working. The deal was artists who worked or did stuff around the Cameron, instead of getting paid in beer or cash, would get paid in Cameron dollars. So you'd go into Jacobs, buy twenty Canadian dollars' worth of turpentine, sign the [dollar] bill, and then Jacobs could redeem it at the Cameron for free booze, or cash, or whatever. The idea was that in the end you would have this piece of paper with all these great artists' signatures on the back, so that would be worth money. If you can get your hands on a Cameron dollar these days. It didn't exactly take over the financial world the way we had thought, but it did work for about a year. Cameron dollars was an updated 1980s art version of a voucher system that had been used in the neighbourhood, particularly in the Finnish community, during the Depression.

SG



The Cameron House was a launching pad for musicians like Molly Johnson, White Noise, Parachute Club, Blue Rodeo, Mary Margaret O'Hara, The Government, and of course Handsome Ned's Saturday afternoon matinees. The interaction of the local music community and visual artists was evident in the continuing installation of artworks in the Cameron, from Rae's back room murals to Sybil's baroque ceiling to Tom Dean's *Paradise* murals to the Hummer Sisters' campaign for mayor and the giant ants on the exterior. The Cameron was to become a local patron, as well as a gathering spot and show-place for artists' work.

So much passed through there, so many bands that started in the back room and went on to Juno fame. It was such an open-ended space, you could do anything you wanted in it. It was Rae who started the painting in the back room, that suite she did, then I did the ceiling in the front room. I put thirteen naked people on the ceiling without any sexual organs. The Cameron House were big supporters of ChromaZone. They gave us an office free for years, put up our work, bought the work. Herb in particular was a facilitator in that he loves art, from the art up. He loved having art around, he loved artists. He had everything to do with it, bringing people together, giving them the opportunity to do something. Tim did it in the grandest way in Chromaliving. Herb did it in his own disorganized fashion at the Cameron.

SG

TIM JOCELYN

A talented artist and designer, cherished friend, and an energetic instigator, Tim was one of the quintessential components in the nurturing and emergence of a series of collective initiatives in the Toronto art scene in the early 1980s. He actively engaged the talents and free flow of ideas to produce something larger than

any individual or artwork. Tim, like Herb Tookey of the Cameron House, Lisa Steele and Clive Robertson of *Fuse* magazine, and Tanya Mars of *Parallogramme*, was an amateur, actively producing aesthetic, social, and critical events that were larger than their short duration would indicate. It was these public celebrations and exhibitions which would be pivotal for the development of confidence for a generation of Toronto artists and provided a platform for some of them to actively participate in the international art scene as fully fledged artists. The basis of Tim's significance, as one of the key Queen Street West personalities, was his dual contribution to both the "arts scene" and the "arts community." The conjunction of the visual arts, graphic arts, high fashion, music, film, and street fashion which Tim instigated created major public spectacles.

Tim was such a catalyst, because he knew so many people, he was really good at keeping in touch with people. He had a phenomenal memory for names, details about people. He didn't have a hierarchical view of the world, he was interested in people. He was as interested in Versace's new line, as he was in what the street market, the people on the corner of Soho and Queen, were selling that year.

AF

What Tim helped us do was get together and realize that there were a lot of other people that shared a common sensibility and actually had some appreciation of the work we were doing.

When that happens it generates a lot of the energy that artists need to continue so they don't feel so isolated. The fact is you do it without financial reward, so there is a sense of isolation. It is important for people to be able to get together and bounce off ideas. In most professions that is a given, when you go to work, you work with other people, lawyers, teachers... And that is not provided in the art world, it is purely up to the

individual. If you are an artist, you have to find an exchange, to be able to talk to someone who understands what you are saying, to get a response to the work. TW

Tim's active participation was one of the things that made ChromaZone and the Queen Street West scene work. His contributions to various exhibitions and events during this period including *An Illusive Affair* at the Rivoli, *Under the Bam*, *Under the Boo* at the Bamboo, *Visual Rhythms* at the Sculpture Garden, multi-site exhibition *Monumenta*, or organizing *Dressing Up* at the Art Gallery at Harbourfront and *Chromaliving*, the latter curated with Andy Fabo, not only brought artists and their work together, it enhanced and informed the larger community of artists.

Chromaliving brought everybody together, even people who were at really opposite poles of aesthetic value. People who probably couldn't sit in the same room comfortably were all involved in it. It completely shattered all the splinter groups—everybody wanted in and everybody was part of it. It was great. We were all one... Everybody was one from the old Isaac farts to those crawling out of art school. Potters, people who make postcards, cute art, great art, everything, batik, video, film. RJ

But the whole thing about interaction with the community, Tim was kind of a median between all kinds of communities in Toronto: the graphic arts people, the fashion people, and the music people. He knew all the designers. He had come up with the fashion people. They were his peers who continued to do their fashion, while Tim diverged from that. I think that is how he got to know all these other various factions. The Rainbow Room, the style scene, has more of a hook into the music scene; they exchange clothes, hairstyles, various things. It is a more commercial scene generally than the art scene. [...]

He had a peripheral relation to the art scene, yet he was not quite IN the art scene. In the art scene he was never taken totally seriously, which was certainly a source of frustration to him. He wasn't the type of guy who would get on a rant and start complaining. I certainly heard him express frustration at different points.

[...]

The real influence of ChromaZone and Tim Jocelyn was putting back a spirit of work into the art world and also a spirit of fun. It was just like, "make the work, look at the work, put the work out, enjoy it!" OG

Tim's work was a celebration of life, and it was contagious. Other people caught his approach to work as empowering and important, while also pleasurable: work as sustained play, and play as sustained work—it was a symbiotic relationship. Although he defined himself as a fashion artist, in a more general sense he was an independent artistic producer. He produced objects such as clothes, furniture, banners, and sculpture, and events such as fashion shows and home shows, but most significantly he animated an ethos of co-operation and production.

ChromaZone was like an extended family, while all-encompassing, allowing a variety of voices to exist. It didn't exclude people, or any particular medium or style—it was all-inclusive. It was this process of bringing people together that overcame the fragmentation of the art scene and made it into a community. RJ

It was working together that made ChromaZone, *Chromaliving*, and the artists of Queen Street West into an actual community. This ability to bring people together, which was personified by Tim's individual talents as a designer and a producer, from his organizing skills as an amateur, and from his highly personable character, made him a magnanimous and vital member of the larger working arts community.



Endnotes

1. This essay is partially based on a series of oral interviews conducted by the author with the original members of ChromaZone: Andy Fabo, Oliver Girling, Sybil Goldstein, Rae Johnson, and Tony Wilson in May 1990. The interviews have been condensed and edited.
2. Painters Eleven was a multi-generational group of painters who came together in 1953 to exhibit their work in Toronto. Although they had no formal aesthetic programme, their paintings were heavily influenced by New York Abstract Expressionism and some by the ideas of Clement Greenberg.
3. Between 1971 and 1981, the increase in the number of artists in Canada was a staggering 244 per cent. See "A Canadian Dictionary and Selected Statistical Profile of Arts Employment 1981," Canada Council, Ottawa, January 1984. With the growing urbanization and centralization of Canadian society as a whole, artists were drawn to metropolitan centres like Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver.
4. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Toronto art was dominated by Abstract Expressionist and Colour Field painters, many of whom had been influenced by the writings of Clement Greenberg. They, along with some major New York-based painters, were represented by the Mirvish Gallery on Markham Street.